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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/24/2026

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: BERRI ASKS USG INTERVENTION FOR CABINET DISCUSSION  
DELAY

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

1, (C) Explaining that he had an urgent message from Speaker Berri, Amal foreign policy advisor Ali Hamdan, in a 11/24 meeting, pleaded with the Ambassador to use USG influence with March 14 leaders to delay the scheduled 11/25 cabinet discussion of the special tribunal documents. Berri, Hamdan said, is trying hard to prevent Hizballah from mounting street demonstrations protesting against the "unconstitutionality" of the Shia-less cabinet. March 14 leaders could assist Berri in his quest by agreeing to postpone the discussion of the tribunal for now. "They (March 14 leaders) lose nothing by waiting a few days," Hamdan said (to which the Ambassador replied, "nothing except maybe their lives"). Hamdan said that Berri complained that Siniora "always" makes the same mistake, tabling something too early when a delay of a few days would allow the Speaker time to cool tempers. Asked by the Ambassador, Hamdan confirmed that Berri and Siniora had spoken by phone about the Speaker's hope for a delay, but Siniora had been noncommittal.

12. (C) Hamdan, quoting Berri, also urged that Lebanon not be asked to bear the burden of the tribunal. Berri hopes that the international community through the Security Council can create the tribunal on its own. "Take this off our shoulders," Hamdan urged. The Speaker wants the tribunal but doesn't want to be part of its creation. The Ambassador questioned whether the tribunal would really have the credibility inside Lebanon it needs if it is imposed upon Lebanon. Hamdan insisted that would be a better option than the current plan of trying to secure, at great danger to Lebanese political figures, GOL and parliamentary concurrence. Hamdan said that, if Siniora would delay the cabinet debate as Berri hopes, then the international community would have the time to work the issue in New York while Berri worked with Hizballah to cancel planned street demonstrations.

13. (C) The Ambassador noted that there is considerable risk to the March 14 forces to delay the cabinet debate, as that gives murderers more time to eliminate cabinet members and ministers. Doesn't the Speaker have something positive to offer in return for a delay? Hamdan speculated that Berri, besides trying to stop demonstrations, may also be able to offer something regarding the cabinet composition or the presidency. Berri was convinced that now was the time to drop Lahoud, but he needed March 14 assistance to get Hizballah and Syria on board. Going for the tribunal now will make it more difficult to oust Lahoud. In addition, maybe cabinet harmony could be restored by an agreement (a) to approve the tribunal and (b) operate on all other issues

by consensus only. But this, too, would require delaying the cabinet debate for now. The Ambassador suggested that perhaps Berri could overcome March 14's justifiable fear of a few days' delay if he would return the favor by having Shia ministers, or at least the three Berri-allied ministers, return to the cabinet, thus ending the constitutional issue. Hamdan looked unconvinced.

14. (C) Later on 11/24, the Ambassador passed on Hamdan's plea to Mohamed Chatah (Senior Advisor to Prime Minister Siniora), Minister of Communications Marwan Hamadeh (allied with Jumblatt), and Ghattas Khoury (advisor to Saad Hariri). While acknowledging that Berri is most likely is stalling for time, the Ambassador suggested that March 14 at a minimum send a messenger to Berri tonight (11/24) to see whether Berri might move now on removing Lahoud. After all, a March 14-Berri exchange tonight does not preclude a cabinet meeting tomorrow, and March 14 would be seen as making a last-minute, positive gesture toward the other side by seeing Berri. Chatah, Hamadeh, and Khoury all expressed skepticism that Berri would have anything new to offer, and they expected that the 11/25 cabinet session would approve the tribunal documents as scheduled. Nevertheless, given their conviction that Hizballah would soon launch street demonstrations, they agreed that March 14 should test Berri by reaching out to him tonight.

FELTMAN